

Guilt and Healing

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What I have to say about guilt and healing can be put into a very few sentences. Different people have different senses of their own guilt. One reason why a spiritual director sometimes fails to understand the guilt feelings of a directee is that they each mean something quite different by the word "guilt." The Christian healer, therefore, ought to reflect on the different possible kinds of guilt feelings.

I suggest that three basic types can be distinguished. "Guilt" may be symbolized as:

Being *separated* from one's community,
Failing in performance, or
Being *responsible* for some destruction.

While everyone certainly experiences each of these three forms at some time or other, it often happens that one of the three predominates, becoming a focal point in a behavior pattern that characterizes an entire life-style.

Each kind of guilt feeling also tends to favor its own remedy for sin. The feeling of being separated demands a reacceptance into one's community. The feeling of having failed generates the need for a confession of one's misdeeds. And the feeling of being responsible for some destruction calls for a restoration of things to their proper order. In short, guilt feelings prompt us to seek healing either through reconciliation, confession, or penance.

That there are these three main kinds of guilt is a very simple idea, really. It originally came to me from my reading of the Freudian psychologist, Karen Horney,¹ where I noticed a connection between her views and the views of another Freudian psychologist, Claudio Naranjo.² This connection has been reinforced by my experience in spiritual counseling and in my other reading.³

Let me put some flesh on the bare bones of this idea, though. You may find it helpful in your own dealings with others. The "flesh" here will be a number of descriptors that I draw mainly from Horney and Naranjo. Each of them aims to develop models where there is as little overlap of

descriptors as possible.

Guilt as Separation

Horney finds that people generally have one of three ways of reacting to conflict: they move *away from* people; they move *toward* people; or they move *against* people. Each of these reactions is the chief characteristic of each of the three kinds of guilt feelings enumerated above. We see this in the first kind of guilt, the guilt that is experienced as separation. Naranjo presents three further distinct personalities within this type: a romantic, artistic type; a loner, hoarder type, and a phlegmatic, socially-blending type.

For an individual who experiences this kind of guilt, no matter what his deed, its ruinous effect appears to be isolation from others, particularly from one's own community, family, homeland, or religion. It makes little difference whether the misdeed is known or not, or whether the damage is permanent or not. What counts is whether the person feels that he or she is a genuine member of the community or just a drop-out for all practical purposes -- present in body, perhaps, but not in spirit. We may expect that such a person's psyche is dominated by a need to belong, along with its counterpart, a dread of abandonment.

When such a person faces conflict, he or she tends to withdraw into hiding. Such persons spontaneously move away from others, so that often, even when they don't feel guilty at any particular time, they will manifest an attitude of aloofness. Persons like this seem to regard themselves as somewhat special, perhaps as yet undiscovered. "It's lonely at the top," the successful will say. Or, "They'll be sorry when I'm gone," for the unsuccessful.

When these people withdraw, however, they do not want to withdraw completely. Vacillating between hiding the treasures hidden within and sharing these treasures with others, they compromise and, as it were, drop one little silver coin at a time, hoping that someone will glimpse their inner wealth of unusual gifts. It's a game of "catch-me-if-you-can," played on the field of human psyches.

The very threat of dreaded separation infects everything they know. Since so much of what one knows comes through what one believes, their fear of separation can make such persons quite aware of the set of beliefs that is maintained by their community, but also quite uncritical of these beliefs since adherence to beliefs is their membership card in the community.

On the other hand, their paradoxical fascination with being special persons fosters a good deal of independent thinking along the margins of their community's interests. Often enough, the result is a roaming intellect in

unusual and creative areas, but an uncritical acceptance of their traditions.

Connected to this fear of being alone, people who compulsively feel the threat of separation indulge in a very curious brand of lying. In order to get along with others, they have to make small talk. But this presents a problem because, feeling they must be "special," means being more complex than the "ordinary" person while also fearing the separation that comes with being too complex for others. So they give accounts that are grossly oversimplified, or are downright fabrications. And no one probes them for deeper explanations. Imagine a man living in a private world where no one else exists to demand an account. He literally would have no public, shareable memory of, say, how he spent yesterday afternoon. He would have no skill in self-description. In the extreme, he would skirt the edges of schizophrenia, melancholy or anomie. He would indulge in formalities. In public he would play a role; his masks would be either flamboyant or sullen--it would make no difference since his inner self would have already withdrawn to the stage-manager's chair while his public self acted out well-rehearsed roles. Rather than living on principle, he would live according to a script, But notice that this lying, this hypocrisy does not flow from a desire to be highly thought of or to hide some secret crime—at least not originally, It would simply be his strategy, designed to meet the problem of trying to be simultaneously special and not alone.

The sense of guilt based on this fear of separation is stamped with a quality of unspeakableness,—a dark and nameless sense of foreboding that defies description. let alone resolution. It appears to do no good to confess, since one's sin has no accurate name. Nor is it worthwhile to seek help for one's problem since there would remain the fundamental doubt as to the trustworthiness of either psychologists or friends. This kind of guilt tortures on a rack that stretches the individual between skepticism and envy.

But reality must out. And the reality is that the human person is filled with a wealth of values and meanings that really are common. It is an illusion to think of oneself as alone, as isolated, as peering out upon a world through eyes that betray nothing whatever of an interior, more vital world. Normally reality breaks in upon this illusion of self-containment when one is loved.

Love has no reason; it demands no accounts; it accepts what is, without condition. At one stroke, it acknowledges qualities that are, indeed, ineffable and special, but it does so in a way that binds friends fast, making isolation less possible and less attractive. Love is a diffusive thing, an expansive thing, even in its initial forms. A young boy begins to treat

his own little sister more kindly when he falls in love with the girl in his seventh-grade math class. His whole world changes. In principle, it seems that reconciliation with one person implies--and to some degree effects—a reconciliation with an entire community. It is acknowledgment, not in the cool abstractions of the mind, but in the concrete and passionate crucible of the heart.

When one is unloved, the opposite reality takes hold. The illusion of being separate, a single unit, just part of a collection instead of part of a community, not only becomes more convincing, it becomes more true. Loners take charge of themselves. They defend their frontiers and sift their pasts to scrutinize the values they had accepted on the basis of some early domestic faith. Reconciliation becomes more difficult because it is less wanted. Each effort by others to forcibly break through their shells only ends up by teaching them some new defensive bulwark. Whoever wants to bring a withdrawing person out of that shell had better be ready for a long season of unrequited love.

Guilt as Failing

The second kind of guilt is experienced as failing, as having done one's best, and still botched things up. It is dramatically portrayed in classical Greek theater, where the word for sin is *hamartia*, "missing the mark." One aims as carefully as one can—but misses. People afflicted with this kind of guilt often refuse to believe in bad will. They absolve themselves of fault by saying, "I didn't mean it." Colored by looks of utter helplessness, their eyebrows raised high and their eyes sad, they explain: "I only tried to do what was right!" Such individuals cannot believe that anyone would deliberately choose wrong. Bad judgment is the culprit--or imprudence, or ignorance, or foolishness—but never bad will. Humans are good!

In Karen Horney's terms, persons burdened with "missing the mark" tend to move *toward* people when conflicts arise. In their moral righteousness they neither withdraw nor attack. They maneuver. They find dodges, games, dances, little schemes for getting around problems by way of flattery or legalisms or a spate of fresh plans. They are fascinated by new methods, gurus, short cuts. They revel in companionship, loyalty, friendship, promises and assurances. They leave behind a trail of strained emotions, half-baked ideas, and other petty violations in human traffic. Compulsively optimistic, they look forward to imminent success: "In no time, everything is going to be all right."

Naranjo, for his part, describes three personalities with these traits: The proud helper, the adventurous planner, and the courageous guardian. While distinct from each other, they each take great pride in their good will.

This hegemony of good will is not exactly idealistic. It does not aim high in order to create a better world. Rather it aims high in order to create a better and more acceptable self. But by their constantly missing the mark, persons who operate this way appear to be all the more unacceptable. all the more in need of supports, crutches. assurances, and consequently all the more involved in schemes ready-made for future disappointments.

The tragic flaw here is that these persons are dependent on others to validate their existence. Dependent personalities lack ordinary insight into just exactly who it is that does the willing. They repeatedly confuse what they actually want to do with what they think others expect them to do. They are constitutionally unable to keep in mind two simple facts: X is forbidden; I want to do X anyway. Either they will smother what is forbidden with qualifications intended to make it publicly acceptable, or they will suppress their desires and pretend to themselves that they really do not desire what the public frowns on.

In fact, however, human beings can and do desire what is evil. Augustine regarded his boyhood theft of some rotten pears as the consummate evil it was because he consciously willed to do what was wrong. He loved the evil for its own sake. "

It takes great humility to admit this, especially for those who depend on their own goodwill for inner security. They need to admit that beneath their apparent optimism crouches a wide-eyed terror. An inner darkness, overrun with bizarre demons and unheard-of abominations, threatens their narrow zone of conscious thinking and feeling. It is matched by a similar darkness outside that lies beyond the complex of their dependency schemes. *Out there*, a chaotic world rumbles and crashes against the walls of their civility. The result is either paranoia—a common symptom of those who pride themselves on their own goodwill—or an oblivious optimism.

Healing comes with confession. To tell the simple truth that I have willed what is evil opens up the hatches to my inner self and lets light flood in.. The bald fact is that I fell, not because my crutches were defective, but because I simply and perversely wanted to fall. Healing begins exactly where that truth is claimed as one's own.

The need to confess goes deep. It shows up in both the most hardened criminal and the simplest child. It makes little difference to the fear of failure whether one confesses to king, spouse, priest or peer. The truth demands its own hearing. While life is rendered more livable by a variety of investments, particularly for dependent types, it is paradoxically rendered more true by periodic *divestments*, being naked before another.

A person can confess his or her sin in many ways, ranging from the very

formal and ritually structured religious confessions to the very informal and sometimes almost casual self-indictments one makes to close friends. It is no virtue to deny such a person a hearing, which we often do for the sake of avoiding an embarrassing exchange. But the worst response, of course, would be to express doubt that the confessing person really did anything wrong ...about the failing where someone's genuine inner failing has been confessed.

Unfortunately, dependent personalities can be rather scrupulous. They will oftentimes distort the very form of confession that might have brought them healing. For such persons, their fixation on the role of will in evil generates endless questions about their own motives, intentions, purposes, and desires in any particular immoral action. They think of motives as rational causes of behavior, as if misbehavior could always be explained. But no one can explain one's motives, either for good behavior or bad. So, unable to clarify to what degree they actually chose the evil, these unfortunate persons swing back and forth between self-forgiveness and self-indictment. They become repetitious in their confessions. Their keen awareness of how deep the roots of their sin go makes them doubt whether they really confessed the sin itself rather than just some manifestation of it. But scrupulosity is only the reemergence, in a new form, of their basic sin: thinking that it's up to them to discover the right path, the proper means to salvation. If they happen to be Christian, they tend to become steeped in the heresy that seeks some "way" to Jesus, as if God had never given Jesus to us as the only "way" to him.

Scrupulous persons must be brought to face the reality that an accurate account of sins will never do. Rather, one must confess one's *truth*, which is a different matter altogether. For them the truth is usually that they genuinely do not know whether or *not* they deliberately chose what is wrong. On the psychological level, they have to be content with a global admission of having "messed up," leaving further judgment to God. Spiritually, they must hear the gospel in this special way: that there is no Savior but Jesus and that all other crutches should either be thrown away as false gods or else accepted as *temporary* gifts from his kind hand. When the scrupulous finally believe that their guilt is perfectly known by one who still loves them anyway and demands no accounts, the compulsive need to repeat their sins will die away.

Guilt as Indictment

The third kind of guilt is experienced as being responsible for damage, being blameworthy. being "guilty" in the legal sense of being the one who must make restitution and face punishment. Because of my sin, some part of the world is now scarred. violated. or destroyed. There exists a gap in

the order of things and it will forever have my name on it. It is "guilt as indictment"; it points to me: I am the one. Persons with such guilt feelings find it difficult to imagine that the other forms-separation and failing-could ever be as weighty on the human spirit.

The feeling of guilt as indictment is most often found in persons who, in Horney's terms, move *against* others in conflict situations: the aggressive, hard-charging men or women of power or responsibility, who are always ready, with a generous dose of force, to put things in their proper place. They face the world with determination, as though there were an eternal job for them to do. They attack even recreation with vigorous purpose. They always find the ideas and schemes of others somewhat limping, in need of improvement-their improvement. But feelings (their own or others) create a special problem because feelings are so intractable. Sometimes feelings are simply ignored: sometimes they are rationalized and reshaped: and sometimes feelings which are particularly tender will completely disarm these individuals in the way an innocent child can "disarm" a tough soldier.

Naranjo again finds three personalities characterized by moving *against* people. The perfectionist is the scolder; the bully is pushy, the star demands applause. All three, it seems, share the spontaneous compulsion to attack when conflicts arise.

There is an ambiguity in the word "responsible" which aggressive persons suffer at the core of their moral sensibilities. Responsibility can mean either being in charge or being to blame, either giving the orders or being subject to punishment. To aggressive persons, it appears that the world cannot get along very well without them, and yet their pasts seem strewn with collisions of their own making. Where they came on with high moral purpose, in looking back they see that they lacked compassion for ordinary weakness. Where they built up effective organizations, they now find their machines have no souls. Where they lusted for power, they destroyed the innocent. They feel "responsible" for meeting crises, but they end up feeling "responsible" for creating them in the first place.

Only one thing will allay such guilt: reparation. Somehow things must be put aright, or, where that is not possible, some penance must be done *to* restore at least an ordered relationship *to* the world.

Being reconciled to one's community is not enough: they will not enjoy a warm heart if the barn has fallen over. Nor will it do *to* confess one's guilt: the aggressive person knows human failing very well, seeing it as the cause of all chaos. What matters is the product of those failings. Sin leaves a permanent scar on the face of the earth, and the sinner's heart will never be healed until that cosmic wound is wiped away.

There is a type of scrupulosity that shows up here. too: not the kind that compulsively vacillates over the morality of actions. but the kind that sees evil where there is none and claims the blame for disorder it never caused. It is the desire for restitution gone haywire. Manuel Smith's book, *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*,⁴ deals with this aggressive brand of guilt.

Again. reality will out. The truth is that human persons, of themselves, cannot restore the proper order of things. We delude ourselves when we think that just a little more effort and determination are required to enjoy a sense of real accomplishment. A smiling. toothless. old derelict once explained his happiness to a friend of mine: "A life in ten thousand pieces cannot be put together again!"

An aggressive person experiences genuine healing when he or she is content to obey the cosmos as it is given. with all its imperfection and disorder. but has faith that God has complete authority. power. and freedom to bring about the true order of things. Here. penance can be more helpful than a mere external restoration of damaged property. Thus the word "reparation." with its overtones of penance as well as restitution. seems apt. A penance in harmony with the crime allows a symbolic expression of our radical impotence. while an attempt at restitution could bear with it the underlying Pelagian hope in our own power to straighten out the world by ourselves.

Symbols of Healing

These three kinds of guilt are conceptual types. No one suffers only one kind to the exclusion of the other two. Still. there does seem to be a correlation between one's spontaneous reaction to conflict and one's dominant experience of guilt. We might press the hypothesis and say that the more one's reaction to conflict is restricted to a single posture in all situations. the more clearly does a single type of guilt feeling stand out. Or. conversely, the more mature a person is in the face of conflicts. the more his or her experience of guilt will bear characteristics of all three types.

Note also that this typology prescind from whether or not one's guilt is justified. It accounts for guilt feelings regardless of their connection to 'some genuine evil. Where the guilt is false or exaggerated. it reveals the locus of the illusion. Where the guilt is genuine. it indicates the symbol through which true healing can be embraced-be it one's relation to one's community (separation). to one's selfhood (failing) or to one's cosmos (indictment).

At best. these types can raise the relevant questions and give cogent leads to answers. Actual insight into anyone's guilt. though, depends upon

the offices of the intelligent Christian healer.

The corresponding "healing" acts of reconciliation, confession, and penance do not, by themselves, have the power to heal. Here is where the Christian healer goes beyond psychology. These acts stand as the symbols, the sacraments of healing in Christ Jesus. It strikes me as no coincidence that Christian churches have three names for the rite of healing: *Sacrament of Reconciliation*, *Confession*, and *Sacrament of Penance*. Perhaps too, the current preference for "reconciliation" says something about the sin of our times.

In any event, it is Christ who heals through the symbols. Without an interpersonal involvement with him in faith, the symbol becomes either an empty formality (for the withdrawing type), a new and merely human means to reach God (for the dependent type), or a Pelagian act of self-assertion (for the aggressive type).

Faith in Christ Jesus is this: to believe that God has given him all power and authority over every society, over each person, and over the entire cosmos; that he is absolutely free to act on our behalf in any circumstances; and that he loves us. So while the Christian healer ought to understand something about the different possible kinds of guilt, such understanding will not serve genuine healing unless the guilty party can be led to accept the person who does the healing—the Healer, Christ Jesus.

¹ See *Our Inner Conflicts* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1945) for her compelling descriptions of each type

² See his *Character and Neurosis: An Integrated View* (Gateway, 1990).

³ The origins of these three symbols of guilt may well be seen also as the first three crises in psychological development outlined by Erik Erikson. In infancy, the crisis of basic trust vs. mistrust is a problem of separation and withdrawal. In early childhood, the crisis of autonomous willing vs. doubt is a problem of failure and dependency. In play age, the crisis of purposeful initiative vs. forbidden consequences is a problem of aggression and indictment. See his *Childhood and Society* (Penguin Books, 195P) Chapter Seven, pp. 239-266.

⁴ New York, Dial Press, 1975